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Discourses on Violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua: Youth, Crime, and the Responses of the State

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the social construction of youth violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador on the one hand, and the related security policies of the three states, on the other. In each country, there is an idiosyncratic way of constructing youth violence and juvenile delinquency. Also, each country has its own manner of reaction to those problems. In El Salvador youths are socially constructed as a threat to security, and the state implements predominantly repressive policies to protect citizens against that threat. In Nicaragua and Costa Rica, where the social discourse on youth violence is less prominent, the state's policies are neither very accentuated nor very coherent, whether in terms of repressive or nonrepressive measures. There are strong relations and mutual influences between the public's fear (or disregard) of youth violence and the state's policies to reduce it.

Keywords: Central America, youth violence, security policies, discourse analysis

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Zusammenfassung

Gewaltdiskurse in Costa Rica, El Salvador und Nicaragua:
Jugend, Gewalt und die Reaktionen des Staates

In diesem Beitrag wird einerseits die soziale Konstruktion von Jugendgewalt in Nicaragua, Costa Rica und El Salvador analysiert und andererseits die auf diese Problematik gerichtete Sicherheitspolitik der drei Staaten. Die Konstruktion von Jugendgewalt und Jugendkriminalität weist von Land zu Land unterschiedliche Charakteristika auf, und die drei Staaten reagieren jeweils anders auf diese Phänomene. In El Salvador werden Jugendliche als Sicherheitsbedrohung konstruiert, vor der die Gesellschaft mit vorwiegend repressiven Sicherheitspolitiken geschützt werden muss. In Nicaragua und Costa Rica, wo der gesellschaftliche Diskurs über Jugendgewalt weit weniger im Mittelpunkt der öffentlichen Debatte steht, sind die diesbezüglichen staatlichen Politiken weder sehr ausgeprägt noch sehr kohärent, gleich ob es sich um repressive oder nichtrepressive Maßnahmen handelt. Gesellschaftliche Angst vor (oder Nichtbeachtung von) Jugendgewalt und staatliche Sicherheitspolitik, um dieser Gewaltform zu begegnen, stehen miteinander in engem Verhältnis und üben gegenseitigen Einfluss aufeinander aus.

Resumen

Discursos de violencia en Costa Rica, El Salvador y Nicaragua:
Juventud, delincuencia y las respuestas del Estado

Este artículo analiza la construcción social de la violencia juvenil en Nicaragua, Costa Rica y El Salvador por un lado, y las políticas de seguridad relacionadas a este fenómeno por otro. En cada uno de los países existe una manera específica de construir la violencia y la delincuencia juveniles. Cada país tiene su propio modo de reaccionar a estos problemas. En El Salvador los jóvenes son socialmente construidos como una amenaza a la seguridad de los ciudadanos, y la sociedad tiene que protegerse ante esta amenaza por medio de políticas represivas. En Nicaragua y Costa Rica, donde el discurso sobre la violencia juvenil es de perfil menos destacado en el debate público, las políticas del Estado no son ni muy marcados ni muy coherentes, sea que se trate de medidas represivas o no-represivas. Existen influencias recíprocas y una relación fuerte entre el miedo a (o el hacer caso omiso de) la violencia juvenil y las políticas del Estado dirigidas a reducirla.

Discourses on Violence in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua: Youth, Crime, and the Responses of the State

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Article Outline

1 Introduction

Within the policy and research field of violence, crime, and insecurity in Latin America, analysts increasingly see violent and criminal behavior among youths as a crucial topic. In many countries, youth violence is identified as one major cause of insecurity (see for example, Fournier 2000). In addition to the concerns raised from a mere security perspective, social actors and scholars focus on youth violence from other viewpoints as well; they discuss it, for instance, with regard to social and development policies.[1] As approximately one-third of the Latin American population is under 15 years of age, social phenomena among youths

[1] See, for example, the region-wide project *Fomento del desarrollo juvenil y prevención de la violencia* (Promotion of Youth Development and Violence Prevention), carried out by the German development cooperation agency GTZ (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) and the PAHO (Pan-American Health Organization); information is available on the website: www.paho.org/CDMEDIA/FCHGTZ/ (31/1/2008).

are highly relevant to the present and future development of the region's societies. On the other hand, in the field of violence and security studies, interest in the different phenomena, causes, and consequences of youth violence began to boom when the debate on violence in Latin America shifted its main focus from political to criminal and social violence; that is, from guerrilla warfare, state terrorism, and "dirty wars" to street delinquency, organized crime, gang violence, domestic violence, vigilante justice, and so forth (see for example, Kurtenbach 2005: 211-215). In this context, youth violence gains importance as an issue interrelated with many other problems: youths and petty crime, youths in gangs, violent youths as (former) victims of domestic violence, youths and drugs, etc. By far the most prominent youth-violence phenomenon in Latin America is the Central American—more exactly the Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran—*maras*, a special type of youth gang that originated in the context of emigration to and deportation from the US.

This paper argues that in some countries of Central America—and presumably in other parts of Latin America—specific groups of young people and, to a certain degree, the younger generation as a whole are socially constructed as a threat to citizen security (*seguridad ciudadana*). In particular, the members of youth gangs (*maras*) are constructed as the number-one menace to the security of the whole of Central America. In this vein, the persecution of youths in the name of *seguridad ciudadana* is legitimized and justified.

The analysis is organized as follows: First, the methodological and theoretical bases of the paper are laid out. In particular, the terms *seguridad ciudadana*, youth violence, and discourse are operationalized. The next section examines the way in which the media, politicians, scholars, and "common people" in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador discuss the issue of youth violence. Subsequently, the focus shifts to the policies undertaken in the three countries to reduce this phenomenon. The concluding section connects the discursive and the policy dimensions, with the aim of detecting possible linkages between both, and reflects briefly on the relevance of the findings for Latin America.

2 Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

This paper is part of a research project[2] which analyzes the origins, development, and institutionalization of the "talk of crime" (Caldeira 2000) in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. The sample of countries was chosen to include a small number of cases which, in spite of their relative homogeneity as Central American nations, feature some differences generally assumed to be of high relevance in the violence and security context: The sample covers countries with a relatively low and a relatively high level of development (Nicaragua and El Salvador vs. Costa Rica), countries with and without a recent history of armed conflict

[2] The project "Public Spaces and Violence in Central America" at the GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies (see www.giga-hamburg.de/projects/violence-and-discourse) is funded by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft).

(Nicaragua and El Salvador vs. Costa Rica), and countries with crime and violence problems perceived as high/increasing and low (El Salvador and Costa Rica vs. Nicaragua). The research design is not comparative in a strict sense: Firstly, the three countries are analyzed not only as individual cases, but also as part of Central America as one "bounded system" (Stake 2000). Secondly, the analysis does not pretend to detect causalities between independent and dependent variables by comparing countries that feature those variables with countries that do not. The project and this paper do not aim to explain *why* a given discourse exists or *why* a government adopts a policy. Rather, the endeavor is to find out *which* discourses exist (and which of them are hegemonic) and *what* societal and political context they exist in. The project focuses on violence-related discursive constellations at the local, national, and transnational level. It analyzes how political actors, the media, "common people," and the scientific community talk about violence and security.

Oettler (2007: 27-28) summarizes some of the main hitherto established results of the project as follows:

> [P]ublic life in the three Central American countries […] is shaped by the fear of crime, albeit with varying threat levels and different objects of fear. […] [T]here are crossnational discursive leitmotivs. […] The notion of organized youth violence has amounted to the most important feature of national and international debates on violent Central American "realities."

Given the prominence of youth violence in the Central American discourses of violence, this paper aims to provide a more detailed analysis regarding that topic. It focuses particularly on the social construction of youth violence on the one hand, and the youth violence-related security policies of governments in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador on the other.

The methodological approach of the project and, hence, of this paper is to conduct a discourse-analytical examination of the talk of (youth) crime in the three countries using a qualitative research design. Taking as a starting point a critical evaluation of the available quantitative data, such as crime statistics and victimization surveys, which many researchers, journalists, and politicians use to substantiate their viewpoints, the project does not intend to discover the "real" dimensions, causes, or consequences of violence in Central America.[3] Instead, it focuses on the way the Central American societies treat the perceived security problems discursively. Therefore, it analyzes written and spoken statements of different powerful and less powerful speakers[4] in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, partially using computer software for qualitative data analysis ("atlas.ti").[5]

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[3] Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a and Oettler 2008 provide more detailed information about the methodological approach of the project. For a discussion on the (precarious) empirical basis of quantitative studies on violence in Central America, see Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a: 8-13.

[4] The division of speakers into more and less powerful members of society is based on the concept of "discursive power" as used in CDA; see for example, van Dijk 2001: 352-371.

[5] Among other features, atlas.ti allows researchers to segment a text and to categorize the segments according to a system of "codes." For example, the code "tougher laws" can be attached to a text passage in which a

Empirically, the discourse analysis is based on sources gathered in the three countries in late 2006. The main sources consist of party platforms; the speeches of prominent politicians; laws and other legal texts; press articles; scholarly texts; about 90 qualitative guided interviews with a wide range of people from different social classes, professions, sexes, ages, etc.; and about 230 brief essays which students of six high schools in the three countries drafted on the topic of violence and insecurity.[6] This selection of sources was chosen to cover both powerful and less powerful speakers. The source selection also reflects the research project's aim of achieving insights regarding the discourses that circulate in specific discursive spaces, in particular in the media, in the political arena, in the academic debate, and in "everyday discourse."[7] It is assumed here that the argumentative foundations of state responses to youth violence and juvenile delinquency are closely linked to the way youth crime is constructed in these discursive spaces. The influences and interrelations between one such discursive space and another and between the discourses and the states' policies are the subject of this paper.

The security policies are analyzed on the basis of the existing literature on the matter, the media coverage,[8] and also some of the above-mentioned qualitative interviews.[9] Unlike the analysis regarding youth violence as such, the analysis of the related policies will not focus on the discursive dimension and will not discuss questions with respect to how our knowledge about those policies is generated. Instead, it will analyze the security policies using "conventional" (positivist) policy analysis. This is not a contradiction to the general constructivist approach of this paper. Rather, the inclusion of a non-discourse-analytical section is legitimate, because the subject of this part of the analysis (security policies on youth violence) is much less a disputed "reality" than the subject of the discourse analysis (youth violence). And, only this combination of constructivism-inspired and positivist methods allows for the detection of the relations between discourses and policies. From a policy-analysis point of view, this research design is in line with Hajer's (1993: 45) claim that "[t]he real challenge for argumentative analysis is to find ways of combining the analysis of the discursive production of reality with the analysis of the (extradiscursive) social practice [...]."

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speaker advocates tougher laws for juvenile offenders. The code can be grouped with other codes to a code family such as "repressive measures." In this way, the researcher can later find all text passages (from different documents) regarding "tougher laws" or "repressive measures" at the push of a button.

6 The students' texts are documented in Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2008b.

7 On the definition of "everyday discourse" used in the project, see Huhn 2008.

8 For the reconstruction of the security policies, in addition to the newspapers included in the data corpus of the discourse analysis, other media, especially online newspapers and news services, were consulted. Much relevant information was provided by "IberoDigital," the online press archive on Latin America from the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies (accessible on the Internet at: www1.uni-hamburg.de/IIK/IberoDigital, 19/5/2008).

9 Some of the interviews, though conducted primarily with the intention of generating discursive events to be analyzed in the discourse analysis, have many characteristics of "expert interviews." Some interviewees, such as criminologist and judge Douglas Durán in Costa Rica or Edgardo Amaya, then jurist of the Salvadoran human rights NGO FESPAD (*Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho*), can undoubtedly be considered "experts."

"Seguridad Ciudadana"

All over Latin America, government policies meant to prevent and/or combat youth violence are generally designed and implemented within the context of the state's policies of *seguridad ciudadana*. The concrete meaning of *seguridad ciudadana* varies significantly, depending on who uses it (and where, when, etc.).[10] However, many authors agree that the term relates to two levels of reality. First, it refers to a condition or a state: to the absence of threats which could endanger the security of a person or a group. In this sense, the term has a highly normative meaning. It describes an ideal situation—probably inexistent in any part of the world but existing "*como un objetivo a perseguir* " (González 2003: 17, "as an objective to strive for"). Second, it refers to public policies aiming (but probably never managing) to achieve this ideal situation. In other words, it refers to policies that seek to eliminate security threats or to protect the population vis-à-vis these threats. In this latter sense, the term *seguridad ciudadana* refers to an empirically existent social practice.

Governments and other actors use the term *seguridad ciudadana* because it has the connotation of a preventive and, to a certain degree, liberal approach to problems of violence and crime. The expression as such emphasizes the protection of the citizen. It thus contrasts with the protection and defense of the state as postulated by the concept of *seguridad nacional* (national security), which dominated the public debate on security in past decades. The terminological shift suggests that the state now protects the physical integrity, property, and individual rights of all citizens. Yet, the concept and practice of *seguridad ciudadana* tend to create a difference between citizens who deserve protection and social groups considered to be a potential threat. Depending on the country, the latter may be, for example, drug addicts or dealers, ethnic groups, immigrants, or, as this paper argues, youths. In a way, people who are part of these groups become the "criminal other" because the policies of *seguridad ciudadana* implicitly exclude them.[11] Often, the state does not protect these people, and their human and civil rights are violated. This, in turn, is justified by the alleged need to protect those citizens considered to deserve protection.

Youth Violence

When we categorize an act as juvenile delinquency or youth violence, we pick one of the many aspects of a given deed and define it as the distinctive one. Apart from the fact that the act is considered criminal or violent,[12] the age of its perpetrator becomes the crucial characteristic by

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[10] For example, there is no consensus as to whether *seguridad ciudadana* also refers to nonintentional (traffic accidents, natural disasters) or economic and social risks and threats.

[11] See the concepts of "criminology of the other" in Garland 2001 and, regarding legislation to control and sanction members of these groups, the concept of *Feindstrafrecht* in Jakobs 1985 (on *Feindstrafrecht* see also Wrocklage 2008).

[12] It is important to note that what is defined as violence and delinquency in a given society is highly dependent on the social context (see Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006: 19-22).

which to classify it.[13] Other aspects, such as the sex or ethnicity of the offender or the victim, the place where the "crime" was committed, the nature of the deed (theft, graffiti spraying, murder…), and so forth, are not relevant for the categorization as youth violence. However, those other aspects might be highly important, for example, in terms of the offender's motives, the methods used to prosecute the crime, or the society's chances of preventing similar acts. The fact that one and the same crime (for example, the assassination of a woman by a young migrant) may simultaneously be an act of youth violence, immigrant criminality, and *femicidio* ("femicide," murder of a woman), shows that the way we perceive a phenomenon is heavily dependent on socially determined and historically mutable categories.

The Discourse-Analytical Approach

From this constructivist point of view, youth violence exists by virtue of its being socially constructed; the dimensions and causes we attribute to it, as well as the approaches we invent to combat or prevent it, depend at least as much on the characteristics of this construction as on the behavior of a country's youths. Therefore, this paper does not contain an empirical introduction to the dimensions, causes, or consequences of youth violence in Central America, nor does it aim to contrast the "reality" of youth violence or youth gangs[14] in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador with the social construction of that "reality." Taking the constructivist approach seriously, it makes no sense to present statistical data on homicides committed by juvenile offenders with the intent of unmasking a discourse as exaggerated or erroneous. Whether a discourse is right or wrong is not the issue here. Instead, this paper aims to identify the specific characteristics of the discourses and address the question of whether and how the discourses are interrelated with the security policies of the respective countries.

The measures taken by governments and other actors are not "natural" reactions to a phenomenon such as youth violence. Rather, they depend on the specific perception each actor has of the problem, and this perception, in turn, is influenced by the public discourse regarding the phenomenon. The specific power relations in a given society determine both the discourse and the impact it has on policymaking. A discourse is generated in multiple dis-

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[13] Like violence or delinquency, "youth" is a social and therefore variable category. For the Latin American context, Potthast/Carreras (2005: 8) state: "The notions of childhood and youth are changing. We already know that these categories are cultural constructions exposed to constant changes and variable according to culture and time" (original quote in Spanish; this and all further translations—Spanish or German to English: PP).

[14] Regarding youth gangs in Latin America in general, Strocka (2006: 134) notes that "the *actual* degree of violent and criminal activity is not the issue. What distinguishes youth gangs from other forms of youth groups is that society generally *perceives* the former to be collectively and inherently associated with illegal and violent activities. In other words, youth gangs are socially constructed as essentially violent and criminal groups of young people who represent a social problem and a serious threat to society. Indeed, one might say that gangs only exist to the extent that their existence is problematic" (italics in original; see also Huhn/Oettler 2007 and Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2008a). For phenomenological information on the number of gangs and gang members, on the violent or illegal activities perpetrated by them, and so forth, see for example, Demoscopía 2007; Rubio 2007; UNODC 2007: 57-65; Peetz 2005; Cruz/Portillo Peña 1998; ERIC et al. 2001; WOLA 2006; Smutt/Miranda 1998.

cursive spaces, in which different actors compete regarding the definition and interpretation of specific violence and crime phenomena. Discourse is understood here as a "regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements" (Foucault 2002: 90). By means of repetition and acceptance, a discourse is a condition and—at the same time—a consequence of collective practices: "Discourse is socially constitutive as well as shaped" (Fairclough/ Wodak 1997: 258). It constructs, transforms, and structures the collective practices. Contrary to the assumption that individual actors, such as politicians or the mass media, "create" or control opinions which are then accepted by society, Jäger (2004: 148) postulates that a discourse is hard to control:

> [N]o individual determines the discourse. A discourse is, so to speak, the result of all the many efforts people make to act in a society. What comes out is something that nobody wanted to come out like that, but which everybody has contributed to in different ways.
>
> [Original quote in German]

In spite of these self-generating dynamics, discourses are not produced in a chaotic way. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has claimed that the historical and ideological context in which a text (or any other discursive event) is produced has to be taken into account as much as the text itself (see for example, Wodak 2001; van Dijk 1999). CDA refers particularly to the power relations that determine how "natural" a social construction seems to a given society and to what extent it is possible to defy the conventions.

3 The Social Construction of Youth Violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador

This section aims to detect the hegemonic discourses on youth violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. Therefore, not only are the discourses of "powerful" speakers, such as the media, politicians, and scholars, analyzed but also those of "less powerful" members of society, such as high school students. It is necessary to consider both "powerful" and "less powerful" speakers because a discourse can only be identified as hegemonic, firstly, if it is the discourse of the discursive elite and, secondly, if nonelite members of society also accept it as "valid knowledge" (Jäger 2004: 149). Regarding the discursive elite, in addition to that of political actors—whose (discursive and material) power does not need to be explained—the media's and the academic community's discourses are included in the analysis. The media, for example, high-circulation newspapers, not only reproduce and multiply opinions, they also produce and transform them (Bourdieu 1998: 28). Especially in Central America, media are not only commercial institutions, but are also pursuing a political agenda of their own (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b: 11-19). Scholars and the institutions they work for can be considered discursively "powerful" because they are important producers of the argumentative bases of the public debate. Their findings and interpretations are often (adapted and) repro-

duced in the media and in the political realm; and they influence governmental and non-governmental decision makers through counseling.[15]

The Media Discourse

As shown in a previous work (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b), in the two Nicaraguan newspapers analyzed (*La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario*),[16] the front-page articles on crime and security published in the years 2004-2006 very rarely refer to problems of youth violence or juvenile delinquency. Other issues, such as drug-related crime or particular cases (of murder, fraud, violations, etc.), are much more prominent. Most of the (few) front-page articles in which youth violence *is* a central topic refer to youth gangs, either to the *maras* in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala or to Nicaraguan *pandillas*. For example:

> *Matamos a nuestros padres si es necesario / La mayoría nació en guetos latinos y barriadas en Los Ángeles hasta la deportación a El Salvador y Tegucigalpa / Primero, combatientes jóvenes de la guerra civil, ahora, la principal fuente del crimen organizado en Centroamérica.*
>
> (*El Nuevo Diario,* 10/5/2005)
>
> [Headline] We kill our parents, if it is necessary / [Subhead] The majority grew up in Latin ghettoes and neighborhoods of Los Angeles until they were deported to El Salvador and Tegucigalpa / [Sub-subhead] First, young combatants of the civil war, now a primary source of organized crime in Central America.

or

> *Pandillas violentas en noche de pelea / [...] Piedras, machetes, tubos y palos fueron los objetos que utilizaron miembros de las pandillas "Los Poseídos" y "Los de Abajo" junto a sus familiares, para agredir a cinco oficiales del Distrito Cinco de Policía.*
>
> (*La Prensa*, 4/10/2004)
>
> [Headline] Violent gangs in night of fight / [Subhead] [....] Stones, machetes, tubes, and sticks were the objects used by the members of the gangs "The Possessed" and "Those from Below" and by their family members to attack five officers from the Fifth Police District.

In quantitative terms, press coverage of youth violence in Costa Rica (the newspapers analyzed are *Al Día* and *La Nación*) does not differ significantly from that in Nicaragua. Gangs also play an important role in (the few) youth violence-related front-page articles, sometimes foreign *maras*, but mostly domestic *pandillas* (or *chapulines*.[17]) For example:

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[15] See also Huhn/Oettler/Peetz (2006a: 23-25), who outline the reasons for choosing this range of discursive spaces (media, politics, everyday discourse, etc.) more extensively.

[16] For detailed information on these and all other newspapers mentioned (ideological stance, circulation numbers, etc.), see Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b: 11-19. In the three countries, the two newspapers with the highest circulation were selected for the analysis.

[17] Costa Ricanism for youth gang.

Barriadas josefinas sitiadas por 15 pandillas juveniles / Bandas tienen hasta divisiones formadas por niños infractores.

(*La Nación*, 6/6/2004)

[Headline] Neighborhoods of San José sieged by 15 youth gangs / [Subhead] Gangs even have divisions consisting of delinquent children.

Also, Costa Rican newspapers publish front-page articles about another topic: youth violence and insecurity in schools and universities, as these headlines exemplify: "*Drogas y violencia sin freno en clases"* (*Al Día*, 28/2/2005, "Drugs and violence unstoppable in [school] classes"), "*Violencia corroe y agobia a 200 centros educativos*" (*La Nación*, 14/3/2006, "Violence corrodes and burdens 200 schools"). While in Nicaragua the newspapers analyzed refer to youth violence rather as a potential future issue (threatening to spill over from other parts of Central America in the form of *maras*), *Al Día* and *La Nación* from Costa Rica postulate that, in their country, serious problems of youth violence are already a reality.

The two Salvadoran newspapers analyzed (*El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*) treat the topic of youth violence and especially that of youth gangs prominently. Huhn/Oettler/Peetz (2006: 25-26 and 38-39) show that this observation is valid for both newspapers throughout the period under review (2004-2006).

Apart from this quantitative evidence, it is also important to note that both the content and the wording of many of the newspaper articles tend to emphasize the seriousness of the *mara* problem. Headlines such as "*Maras asedian Soyapango*" (*El Diario de Hoy*, 25/4/2004, "*Maras* besiege Soyapango [a shanty town in the metropolitan area of San Salvador]") or "*297 homicidios durante mayo*" (*La Prensa Gráfica*, 1/6/2006, "297 homicides in May") are typical examples.

The Political Discourse

Alongside the media, other powerful speakers in the debate about youth violence and delinquency are political actors (political leaders, government officials, parties, parliamentary factions, NGOs, etc.). The sources analyzed (speeches of prominent politicians, party platforms, etc.) show that in Nicaragua youth violence is an issue rarely addressed in the political realm. The government programs drafted by political parties in view of the 2006 general elections are a good example. In the 15-page document *Programa de Gobierno* (Government Program) of the now-ruling FSLN,[18] the only reference to youth violence reads,

Vamos a trabajar el tema de las pandillas en Nicaragua, orientados hacia la reinserción social de sus integrantes, como una forma de ir resolviendo socialmente la exclusión de estos sectores, y a la vez, dando sostenibilidad a la seguridad ciudadana.

(Alianza Unidad 2006: 12)

[18] *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front).

> We are going to work on the issue of gangs in Nicaragua; we are oriented towards social reintegration of their members as a form of solving the exclusion of those sectors in a social manner, and, at the same time, giving sustainability to citizen security.

Not surprisingly, the only passage—located on page 44 of a total of 45—referring to youth violence in the MRS'[19] program sounds quite similar:

> *Impulsaremos programas para trabajar con los jóvenes organizados en pandillas y para promover su incorporación al trabajo y a la vida de la comunidad.*
>
> (Alianza MRS 2006: 44)
>
> We are going to implement programs to work with youths organized in gangs and to promote their integration into the labor market and into community life.

Regarding the right-of-center parties, no ALN[20] document containing the party's or its presidential candidate's plans concerning youth violence has been found. The policies the PLC[21] proposes, in terms of *seguridad ciudadana* in general, seem to be inspired by the *mano dura* (iron-fist) rhetoric of successful contenders in previous elections in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Yet, with regard to the particular issue of youth violence, it is difficult to find any differences from the preventive and rehabilitation-oriented stances of FSLN or MRS:

> *Reforzaremos la seguridad ciudadana especialmente en los barrios de mayor concentración poblacional con una política de cero tolerancias a la delincuencia. Asimismo fomentaremos la reinserción social de los grupos juveniles en riesgo.*
>
> (Alianza PLC 2006: 37)
>
> We are going to strengthen citizen security, especially in neighborhoods with major population concentration, applying a zero-tolerance policy against delinquency. Also, we will encourage social reintegration of the juvenile groups at risk.

Regarding documents from political actors, the Costa Rican case is similar to the Nicaraguan in terms of the relatively low importance of youth violence within the broader context of insecurity. It is crucial to note, though, that this broader context is of much higher relevance in the public debate in Costa Rica than in Nicaragua. For Costa Rica as for Nicaragua, there are rather few sources with any kind of "official" character (speeches of high-ranking politicians, party platforms, etc.) that explicitly address the issue of youth violence or juvenile delinquency. Sometimes, as in the following extract from current president Óscar Arias' inaugural speech, youth and crime are only implicitly linked—here, by connecting education with crime and by mentioning "school corridors" as a site of (small-scale) drug trafficking:

> *Educación y seguridad. A partir de hoy, daremos un rumbo claro a la educación pública. [...] Daremos un rumbo claro al combate contra la inseguridad y las drogas. Vamos a ser duros con*

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[19] *Movemento de Renovación Sandinista* (Sandinista Renewal Movement): MRS is a party of Sandinista dissidents.
[20] *Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance).
[21] *Partido Liberal Constitucionalista* (Constitutionalist Liberal Party).

la delincuencia, pero mucho más duros aún con las causas de la delincuencia. Profundizaremos la orientación preventiva de la Fuerza Pública y la dotaremos de más recursos. […] Combatiremos sin descanso el narcotráfico. Y no solo el gran narcotráfico […], sino, en especial, el pequeño tráfico de drogas, el que ocurre en las esquinas de nuestros barrios, en los parques de nuestras comunidades, en las salidas y en los corredores de nuestros colegios. Esa será una de las mayores prioridades en materia de seguridad ciudadana.

(Arias Sánchez 2006: 6)

Education and security. From today on, we are going to adopt a clear course in public education. […] We are going to adopt a clear course in the fight against insecurity and drugs. We are going to be tough on delinquency, but even tougher on the causes of delinquency. We are going to deepen the preventive orientation of the Public Force [that is, the police] and we are going to provide it with more resources. […] We are going to fight drug trafficking relentlessly. And not only the big drug trafficking, but, in particular, small-scale drug trafficking, as it happens at the corners of our neighborhoods, in the parks of our communities, at the doors and in the hallways of our schools. This will be one of the first priorities in terms of citizen security.

The quote also provides a good example of the government's approach to reducing (juvenile) delinquency. In a way, Arias' rhetoric resembles that of the Salvadoran government, as it advocates repressive policies in combination with preventive and rehabilitation-oriented measures. Apparently, there is no consensus among political actors in Costa Rica about this approach, at least not with regard to juvenile delinquency. The main opposition party, the leftist PAC,[22] for example, issued a government program before the 2006 elections (*Convocatoria a la ciudadanía para el periodo de gobierno 2006-2010*, Call to the Citizenry for the Period of 2006-2010). While the program contains some "zero-tolerance" elements regarding drug-related crime, it appears to be unconditionally opposed to repression as a way of fighting juvenile delinquency:

Debemos acabar con la disimulada tolerancia con que operan esos grupos [del crimen organizado] en muchas barriadas de la capital y demás ciudades del país, así como en zonas rurales, donde el expendio y consumo de drogas se da muchas veces a vista y paciencia de las propias autoridades. […]

Propuestas: […]

- *La atención a problemas específicos de niños y jóvenes con conductas delictivas y pandillas juveniles a través de programas de capacitación que tomen en cuenta el respeto a su dignidad, la generación de empleo e inserción a la sociedad.*
- *Prevención y rehabilitación de jóvenes en la marginalidad rural y urbana, a través de distintos programas y proyectos sociales y educativos que les reconozca su condición de personas.*

(PAC 2006: 46-50)

22 *Partido Acción Ciudadana* (Citizen Action Party).

> We have to stop the hidden tolerance these groups [of organized crime] operate with in many neighborhoods of the capital and other cities of the country, as well as in rural areas, where the sale and the consumption of drugs often happens in the presence of the authorities who let it happen with indifference. […]
> Propositions: […]
> – The attention to specific problems of children and youths with delinquent behavior and of youth gangs, by means of training programs that take into account their dignity, generate labor, and foster their integration in society.
> – Prevention and rehabilitation of youths in marginalized rural and urban areas by means of a variety of social and educational programs and projects which respect them as human beings.

The document explicitly refers to "youth gangs" ("*pandillas juveniles*"). The political class seems to be sharing the media's view and depiction of youth violence as a twofold problem: of gangs on the one hand, and other problems (particularly drugs and violence in schools) on the other.

As to El Salvador, many leaders and organizations from different political camps portray juvenile delinquency, and in particular the *maras*, as one of the biggest problems the country is currently facing.[23] To give only one of myriad possible examples, President Saca declared the following in an address to the people of El Salvador on the second anniversary of his assumption of the presidency:

> *Pero es en el tema de seguridad ciudadana donde tenemos el reto más grande. El crimen organizado y la delincuencia de las pandillas golpean constantemente a la ciudadanía honrada, que es la inmensa mayoría, y que atentan contra la estabilidad del país en todos los órdenes.*
>
> (Saca 2006)

> But it is in the issue of citizen security where we confront the biggest challenge. Organized crime and the delinquency of gangs constantly hit decent citizens, who are the immense majority, and this is an attack against the stability of the country.

As another example, the most important opposition party, FMLN,[24] issued a platform for the 2004 elections which stated the following among 15 *Grandes metas para El Salvador* (Big Goals for El Salvador):

> *7. País seguro: Progreso de la seguridad ciudadana, la reducción de la violencia social, la superación del fenómeno de las maras y combate efectivo al delito y la impunidad en todas sus expresiones, incluyendo la corrupción de los que tienen poder. Avance en la seguridad jurídica y el estricto respeto al Estado de Derecho.*
>
> (FMLN 2003: 18)

> 7th, secure country: Progress of citizen security, the reduction of social violence, the overcoming of the *mara* problem, and the effective fight against all kind of crime and impunity.

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[23] Regarding how to solve the problem, there is no such consensus. Rather, there is a fierce polarization between the political right, which favors repression, and the leftist opposition, which opposes it.

[24] *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front).

Still, in many newer sources from left-wing political actors such as FMLN, the issues of juvenile delinquency and youth gangs are not mentioned. For example, the *Plataforma de la esperanza* (Platform of Hope), published by the FMLN parliamentary faction in 2005, contains a section (section VIII) on violence and crime. Implicitly, it accuses the ARENA[25] government of being responsible for *"la avalancha de homicidios que han crecido, hasta triplicarse, con los gobiernos Flores-Saca"* ("the avalanche of homicides that has grown, even tripled, during the governments of Flores and Saca", FMLN 2005: 19). But nowhere in the document does the party directly address juvenile delinquency or youth gangs. It can only be speculated that those leftist actors are deliberately trying not to contribute to what they see as a security paranoia—from which only the right has managed to benefit at the ballot box.

The Academic Discourse

In the academic debate on violence and insecurity in Nicaragua, a considerable corpus of literature on youth-specific topics, particularly youth gangs, has emerged in the past few years (for example, Rocha 2003, 2005, and 2007; DIRINPRO et al. 2004; Rodgers 2002, 2003, and 2007). This is in contrast to the relatively low profile these topics have had, as we have seen, in the media and in the political arena. Presumably, the fact that—outside Central America—*maras* are known as a "Central American" problem has contributed to this academic overrepresentation of gang issues in Nicaragua as well as in Costa Rica. One of the most important publications on youth gangs in Central America, the four volumes of *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica* (ERIC et al. 2001, 2004a/b and Cruz 2006), is a typical example: Despite all the differences between Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran *maras* on the one hand, and Nicaraguan *pandillas* on the other, each volume includes one chapter on the Nicaraguan case just as it does for the three other countries (the case of Costa Rica, though, is not included); two of the four volumes were published in Managua. Also, it seems that Nicaragua's past, marked by revolution and armed conflict, has drawn some attention to the country's current gang problem and has turned it into a more interesting study subject than, for example, Honduran *maras*.

In the case of Costa Rica, it can be assumed that the academic infrastructure, which is relatively well developed in comparison to all other Central American countries, allows for the inclusion of a topic such as youth gangs on the agenda, even if it may not be a key problem for the country itself (but rather for its neighbors). In this context, it is important to note that, when scholars from Costa Rica study youth gangs in other parts of the isthmus—especially when they publish their results in Costa Rica—this has to be considered part of the Costa Rican (and Central American) academic discourse on youth violence. Nevertheless, Nicaraguan and Costa Rican scholarly literature on youth gangs and youth violence is, in quantitative terms, not comparable to that of El Salvador.

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[25] *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (Nationalist Republican Alliance).

There (in El Salvador), youth violence and gang activity can currently be considered the number-one issue. Not only has the corpus of literature on these matters grown exponentially in recent years,[26] but also some of the most recognized research institutions of the country, such as IUDOP,[27] have focused on these themes and have participated in conferences and symposia with high public visibility.[28] An exhaustive description and analysis regarding the content of the written and spoken statements of scholars cannot be given in this paper, but in general, the viewpoint of the academic community working on El Salvador does not differ much from the media's and many politicians' point of view, particularly in terms of one (fundamental) aspect: Youth violence, and the *maras* in particular, are depicted as one of the country's biggest problems and as a serious threat to public security. There certainly are a number of disagreements, both among researchers and between them and political actors or the media, regarding many specific aspects of the issue, for example, the size and characteristics of the gangs or the way youth violence could or should be prevented or combated. But there is a broad consensus about the prime importance of the subject for El Salvador among Salvadoran and international researchers alike.[29]

The "Everyday Discourse"

To investigate if and how the discourse of the media, political actors, and scholars corresponds with (or contradicts) the discourse of other, less powerful, members of society, brief texts drafted by students and interviews with people from different social backgrounds were analyzed.

In both Nicaragua and Costa Rica the issue of youth violence is only of marginal importance in the students' texts. In their answers to an open, not violence-related question about the most urgent problems of the country,[30] only three participants in Nicaragua and none in Costa Rica mention youth violence or juvenile delinquency as a major problem (see Table 1).

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[26] To name but a few (some refering to *maras* in Central America in general, but treating the case of El Salvador with special emphasis): WOLA 2006, Carranza (without year), Aguilar Villamariona (2006a), Reguillo 2005, Santacruz Giralt/Concha-Eastman/Cruz 2001, Savenije 2004.

[27] The *Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública* (University Institute on Public Opinion) is part of the prestigious Jesuit University UCA (*Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas"*).

[28] For example, at the international conference *La violencia juvenil en la región: un diálogo pendiente* (Youth Violence in the Region: A Pending Dialogue) on October 26, 2006, in San Salvador, organized by the *Coalición Centroamericana para la Prevención de la Violencia Juvenil* (Central American Coalition for the Prevention of Youth Violence), researchers from Central America, Mexico, and the USA met with high-ranking representatives of governmental and nongovernmental institutions to discuss the *mara* problem (see www.uca.edu.sv/publica/iudop/Web/foro.html, 24/7/2007).

[29] See Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a: 26-29 for a more detailed analysis of scholarly (and other) publications on the Central American youth gangs.

[30] The question was: "Imagínese que Usted fuera presidenta o presidente de El Salvador. ¿Cuáles son los problemas más urgentes del país? ¿Cómo los solucionaría?" ("Imagine you were the president of El Salvador. What are the most urgent problems of the country? How would you solve them?") The research team and the teachers involved did not make any mention of or allusion to any security issue before the students handed over their answers.

In the case of the three relevant answers from Nicaragua, two contain an explicit reference to youth gangs. "Talia,"[31] from a public school in Managua, writes,

> *primeramete los problemas urgentes son las pandillas, las drogas, robo, etc. Yo lo solucionaría que policías hayan en todos los puntos de robos, que las pandillas busquen a dios porque dios los cambia y los cuida en donde ellos vayan.*
>
> first, the most urgent problems are the gangs, drugs, theft, etc. I would solve it by placing police in every spot where the thefts occur; the gangs should search for god because god can change them and take care of them wherever they may be.

The third one refers to solving street delinquency perpetrated by youths in general, not necessarily by gangs:

> *Invertir en educación: se reduciría la delincuencia en el país, porque ya no andarían los jóvenes en la calle vagando.*
>
> ("Xelene," from a private school in Managua)
>
> Invest in education: delinquency in the country would be reduced, because youths would not hang out in the streets anymore.

Table 1: Youth Violence as a Central Theme in Pupils' Answers

	Private school			Urban public school(s)				Rural school		
	NI	*CR*	*SV*	*NI*	*CR*	*SV1*	*SV2*	*NI*	*CR*	*SV*
Total participants per school	19	20	19	27	24	25	27	21	20	10
1st (open) question	1	0	16	2	0	11	13	0	0	6
2nd question (related to personal security)	5	0	4	3	0	14	20	1	0	4

Notes: NI = Nicaragua; CR = Costa Rica; SV = El Salvador (two urban public schools in El Salvador).
Source: Author's compilation.

As to the interviews, the differences between Nicaragua and Costa Rica are more significant. In Nicaragua, for ten of the interview partners, youth violence, particularly *pandillas*, is an important topic. In Costa Rica, the odd interviewee mentions youth violence or youth gangs, but no one addresses the issue in such a way that it could be assumed he or she considers it a central security problem. In Nicaragua, for example, a Managua nurse, when asked about street violence, says,

> *Ah, la violencia callejera ha aumentado grandemente, o sea, la mayoría de los pacientes que nosotros recibimos aquí, la gran mayoría son violencia, que son las peleas entre pandillas, la agresión entre el que le roba a otra persona, eso ha aumentado mucho más que el otro tipo de violencia—intrafamiliar.*

[31] For anonymity's sake, the students where asked to mark their respondent sheets with fake names.

> Ah, street violence has increased enormously; I mean, the majority of the patients we treat here, the vast majority are due to violence, that is, fights between gangs, aggressions when a person is robbed. That has increased much more than the other kind of violence—domestic.

And to the inteviewer's question "*¿Cuál sería el papel de las pandilla? ¿Hay muchas pandillas aquí en Managua?*" ("What role do the gangs play? Are there many gangs here in Managua?") she answers,

> *Bastantes pandillas, demasiadas pandillas, demasiadas pandillas y también hay mucho—nosotros les llamamos ladrones o sea gente que roba. Tal vez las pandillas no te roban. Las pandillas lo que crean es la inseguridad en los barrios que se agarran entre ellos por la droga.*
>
> A lot of gangs, too many gangs, too many gangs and also there are many—we call them thieves, that means, people who steal. Maybe, the gangs do not steal from you. The gangs, what they generate is insecurity in the neighborhoods, because they fight against each other because of drugs.

Apparently, in Nicaragua there is a phenomenon that occurs inversely in Costa Rica: While for many Nicaraguan "common people," youth gangs and other forms of youth violence are an important cause of concern, the dominant speakers in the public discourse (with the notable exception of the social science community), that is, the media and political leaders and institutions, tend to ignore or implicitly downplay the problem. In Costa Rica, politicians, scholars, and, to a limited extent, the media tend to give the issue a higher profile than less powerful speakers do.[32]

For El Salvador, both the students' texts and the interviews reveal a high level of concern—and fear—vis-à-vis gang and youth violence. Table 1 shows that in El Salvador a majority of participants (46 out of 81 students) in the "school experiment," responding to the open, not violence-related question, mention youth violence as a major problem in the country. For example, "Dominic," from a public secondary school in the center of San Salvador, writes,

> *Como presidente lo primero que hiciera fuera el problema de las pandillas, sería que si el pandillero se retira o por lo menos tiene buen comportamiento pedir el informe para ver su avance y luego decidir si sacarlo de la prisión o no.*
>
> As president, the first thing I would do is the gang problem; it would be, if the gang member quits the gang or, at least, behaves well, I would see the report to consider his progress and then decide whether to let him out of prison or not.

Interestingly, in the answers to the "open" (that is, not violence-related) question, a higher proportion of pupils from the private school and from the rural school than from the urban

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[32] This observation corresponds with a general impression the project researchers had during their field research in Central America: The dominant discourse in Nicaragua seems to rest upon the firm conviction that Nicaragua is a thoroughly peaceful country, "tired" of violence since the armed conflict ended. In Costa Rica, in contrast, the notion of a "naturally" or "traditionally" peaceful country is increasingly being replaced by the belief that "foreign" influences (globalization, immigrants, youth gangs, etc.) are currently transforming Costa Rica into a place nearly as violent and dangerous as any other part of Central America.

public schools refer to youth violence as an important problem in the country.[33] Yet in a second question, directly asking for personal experiences with security/insecurity,[34] the proportion of private school children who refer to *maras* or other youthviolence phenomena is low. In contrast, in the urban public schools many participants report having had such problems personally.[35] The students of the private school, who usually have an upper middle-class background—which, in El Salvador, includes certain security standards—seem to be more reflective about youth violence than their peers from the public school; even if, for the latter, *maras* pose a much more immediate threat.[36]

Many Salvadoran interview partners also express their preoccupation with youth violence and the *maras*.[37] The following short extracts of two of the interviews illustrate this: Answering the question "*¿Y cómo ve Usted la situación del país, de El Salvador, o también de la ciudad aquí, en cuanto a cuestiones de violencia*?" ("And how do you perceive the situation of the country, El Salvador, and also of the city here, in terms of violence?"), a taxi driver says,

> *Si está bastante grande la violencia, la violencia está muy, muy grande. Se ha crecido porque [...] el gobierno no se ha puesto mucho interés, pués, es que las leyes son muy débiles para los muchachos que son mareros.*
>
> Yes, there is quite a lot of violence, there is very, very much violence. It has increased because [...] the government has not put much interest in it. The laws are very weak for the youngsters who are gang members.

Asked about the differences between the situation during the civil war and today, a consultant from a German company's Salvadoran office responds, [38]

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[33] In the private school 16 out of 19 participants mention youth violence, mainly *maras*, as a serious problem in the country. In the two urban public schools (one in the center of San Salvador and one in Ciudad Delgado, which is part of the "metropolitan area" of San Salvador) the proportion is 11 out of 25 and 13 out of 27 respectively, and in the rural public school (in the village Las Trancas in Chalatenango province) 6 out of 10.

[34] The question was: "¿Se siente Usted segura/seguro—por ejemplo en su barrio, colonia, pueblo, ciudad, país, en su familia, colegio etc.? Por qué? / ¿Porqué no?" ("Do you feel safe—for example in your quarter, neighborhood, village, town, country, in your family, school, etc.? Why? Why not?")

[35] Private school: 4 out of 19; public school in the center of El Salvador: 14 out of 25; public school in Ciudad Delgado: 20 out of 27; and rural school: 4 out of 10.

[36] The results of a survey from IUDOP (2006: 20) show a similar trend with regard to insecurity in general. Interviewees with an upper-class background are significantly more worried about the security situation than others. While 66.7 percent of upper-class (*estrato alto*) respondents say delinquency is the most important problem in the country, the proportion of interviewees in the other parts of society who answer the same is lower: upper middle-class, 42.3 percent; lower middle-class, 50.8 percent; workers, 46.1 percent; marginalized poor (*estrato marginal*) 45.0 percent; and rural, 47.2 percent.

[37] As to the interviews, it does not make much sense to include quantitative aspects in the analysis, because there is no statistical representativeness regarding the number (about 30 per country) and the selection of interviewees. Also, in the course of some but not all the interviews, the interviewer explicitly asked the interview partner for a statement on youth violence or youth gangs. Nevertheless, the differences between the countries should be mentioned: In El Salvador, 21 of all interviewees identified youth violence as a major problem in the country; whereas in Nicaragua 10 interview partners and in Costa Rica no interview partner expressed a similar preoccupation with youth violence in their country.

[38] The interview partner is German, but has lived in El Salvador since the 1970s. In the Salvadoran context, his socioeconomic background can be described as ranging between upper middle-class and upper class.

Gut, sagen wir einmal ganz simpel, zur Zeit der Bürgerkriege war das mehr eine soziale Bewegung. […] Heute die Gefährdung ist einfach da, dass das sozioökonomische Umfeld auf Grund der massiven Zunahme der Bevölkerung so negativ ist, dass junge Leute kaum eine Chance haben, eine sinnvolle Beschäftigung zu kriegen. […] Und was die Situation etwas problematisch macht, ist ganz simpel, dass sich diese Leute, die jungen Leute, in Jugendbanden organisieren, die ihren Ursprung hatten in den USA.

Well, let's put it simply, at the times of the civil wars, it was kind of a social movement. [...] Today, there is simply the threat that the socioeconomic context has become negative because of the massive population growth, because young people have hardly any chance of finding a meaningful job. [...] And what makes the situation somewhat difficult is, very simply, that these people, these young people, organize in youth gangs, which originated in the USA.

Comparing the Discourse of Powerful and Less Powerful Speakers

In light of the above analysis of the sources, it can be confirmed that youth violence, and the *mara* issue in particular, are depicted by both powerful and less powerful speakers in El Salvador as one of the country's main problems. Furthermore, the selected quotes indicate which security policies those speakers see as the appropriate ones in the attempt to tackle these problems. While the citations reflect a rather repressive approach, there are a considerable number of sources, especially academic texts and interviews, that reveal a more liberal way of thinking, particularly through an emphasis on prevention or on the need to fight the "deeper causes" of the violence (poverty, lack of education, lack of values, etc.). Apparently, within the consensus about the gravity of the issue of youth and gang violence, there are competing opinions about the way to solve those problems. Yet, with the most influential media companies, the government, and other powerful political and economic actors (for example, the business-friendly think tank FUSADES[39]) on its side, the repressive approach is currently the hegemonic one.

However, as to the discourse of the Salvadoran government, the sources clearly show that, at least since President Saca took office in 2004, the repressive discourse against *maras* has been combined with one of prevention and rehabilitation. A typical example is this passage from Saca's inaugural speech on June 1, 2004:

Aplicaremos Súper Mano Dura para llevar a los delincuentes ante la ley, pero a la vez tendremos la Mano Extendida para evitar que los que están en riesgo delincuencial caigan en él y para rescatar y rehabilitar a aquellos que buscan reinsertarse en la sociedad.

(Saca 2004)

[39] *Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social* (Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development).

> We are going to use 'Super Iron Fist' to bring the delinquents before the law, but at the same time we will lend our hand to avoid that those who are in risk become delinquents and to rescue and rehabilitate those who want to be reintegrated into society.

The 2004 government program of the ruling ARENA party also emphasizes this combination of repressive and nonrepressive measures:

> *[H]abrá especial concentración en la situación particular de las pandillas, tanto en cuanto a la prevención y la sanción, como a la reincorporación de sus miembros a la sociedad.*
>
> (ARENA 2004: 11)

> [T]here will be special concentration on the particular situation of gangs, both in terms of prevention and sanctions and in terms of the reintegration of their members into society.

As the next section of this paper argues, this combination strategy is (at most) only halfheartedly implemented in actual policies and thus mainly exists on the rhetorical level. But nevertheless, an interesting result of this analysis is the finding that there is significant congruence between the government's discourse on how to reduce youth gang violence on the one hand, and the opinions most of our interview partners express on the other. Twenty-two interviewees in El Salvador make a statement about what kind of solution they see to insecurity.[40] Of these 22, 13 demand measures that can be categorized as repressive; 20 argue for nonrepressive action.[41] Thus, 11 of the 13 who argue for repression also want nonrepressive policies to be implemented, and only two of the 22 want exclusively repressive measures. A police officer from San Salvador, for example, complains about judges who, in his view, are too permissive:

> *¿De qué sirve que se le hagan reformas a los códigos?, si al final los jueces no aplican la ley, no aplican la sana crítica.*
>
> What are the law reforms good for, if, at the end, the judges do not implement the laws, do not judge according to sanity and reason?

Nevertheless, later on, he takes a more preventive, education- and value-oriented (although at the same time control-oriented) stance:

> *La seguridad es de todos. La seguridad es del sacerdote, la seguridad es del alcalde, la seguridad es de los maestros, la seguridad es de los motoristas, de todos los que conformamos el ente social. La responsabilidad del sacerdote es orientar a su feligresía para que si [...] conoce al hijo de*

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[40] Not all the answers are related to *maras* or youth violence, but rather to insecurity in general. Yet, as in the Salvadoran case the gangs are seen as the main producers of insecurity, it can be assumed that most answers are implicitly or explicitly referring to that issue (among others, at least).

[41] The most important *repressive* measures demanded by the interviewees are more staff and money for the police, tougher legislation, tougher judges, more involvement of the military and private actors in the security sector, and more international cooperation to prosecute gang members. The most important *nonrepressive* measures demanded by the interview partners are prevention, rehabilitation, better education, better impartment of values, urban planning, social justice, development/poverty reduction, change of the political system or of the development model, improvement of gender equality, fighting corruption, prohibition of weapons, more just and more accessible justice system, strengthening of human rights, and community-based policing. (Both lists in random order.)

una señora que ya tiene tendencias a entrar a la delincuencia, bueno, traerlo a la iglesia y empezar a adoctrinarlo de acuerdo a la doctrina de cada iglesia para poder ver si se rescata, como dicen, si rescatan las almas. Ya con eso ellos están haciendo seguridad.

Security is everybody's matter. It is the priest's matter, the mayor's; it is the teachers' matter; it is the [taxi] drivers' matter; it is the matter of all of us who belong to society. The responsibility of the priest is to guide the believers. If he knows a woman's son who already tends towards delinquency, well, bring him to church and start to indoctrinate him according to the doctrine of the church. So he can see if he can save him, as they say, save his soul. That way, they have already generated security.

Apparently, the discourse of the government and that of many "ordinary people" about how to confront (youth) violence have much in common in El Salvador (see Table 2). And even if the sources do not allow assumptions in terms of causal relations, they do suggest there is at least some kind of close interrelatedness and (presumably mutual) influence between the two discursive spheres.

Table 2: Prominence of Youth Violence in the Discourse of Different Speakers

	Nicaragua	**Costa Rica**	**El Salvador**
Powerful speakers			
Newspapers	Low	Low/medium	High
Political actors	Low	Low/medium	High
Scholars	Medium	Medium	High
Less powerful speakers			
Students	Low	Low	High
Interviewees	Medium	Low	High

Source: Author's compilation.

In sum, in Nicaragua, youth violence seems to be treated as being of rather marginal relevance by powerful speakers, such as politicians or the media. It is depicted as being of slightly higher importance by other, less powerful, members of society. In Costa Rica, where violence and crime in general are a much-discussed topic in all spheres of society, youth violence in particular is more prominently addressed by political actors, academic authors, and the media than by "common people." For El Salvador, the sources show that youth violence and particularly the *mara* gangs are seen throughout society as the country's main security problem. It seems that for some parts of Salvadoran society, the gangs are in fact the only important security issue. The fear of youth violence is so intense and ubiquitous that not only (alleged) gang members but also the entire younger generation come under suspicion.

4 Government Policies to Reduce Youth Violence in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador

This section will examine the government policies designed to counter juvenile delinquency and youth violence in the three Central American countries (Table 3, p. 30, summarizes these policies). It will also point out whether and how these policies correspond with the hegemonic discourse on those subjects in the three societies.

Nicaragua

For Nicaragua, Rocha (2005 and 2007) and Rocha/Bellanger (2004) have analyzed the state's reaction to youth violence and in particular to youth gangs. There seems to be a substantial difference between the official policies, as they become manifest in laws, directives, budgets, etc., on the one hand, and the actual behavior and performance of lower-ranking police officers or other state representatives directly confronted with the problem on the other. On the official level, the institutional history of the Nicaraguan police, the *Policía Nacional* (National Police), is one of the main reasons the state has not opted for a repressive approach to youth violence.

> [T]he highest positions in the National Police are held by approximately forty former combatants of the revolution; they occupy the highest echelons and are divided into two networks: the traditional economic elite network and the FSLN network.
>
> (Rocha 2005: 3)

Both power groups inside the police have no interest in introducing iron-fist policies. The "traditional economic elite network" wants to present Nicaragua as a country with low criminality and, thus, high attractiveness for foreign investments. Extensive repressive measures and the inevitable public attention they provoke would make it difficult to uphold that image. The "FSLN network," in turn, formerly had an interest—at least until Daniel Ortega won the elections in 2006—in maintaining a positive relationship with the *pandillas*, because Sandinismo saw the gangs as potential support groups for public unrest. Moreover,

> [t]he Sandinista elite's ability to use sociological terms and concepts and their notoriously superior discursive capacity in relation to their Central American colleagues enabled the appearance of innovative proposals and an assessment of citizen security that deepened the analysis of youth gangs without criminalising their members.
>
> (Rocha 2005: 5)

Instead of tightening repression, the *Policía Nacional* focuses on community-based rehabilitation; this may include negotiating armistices between *pandillas*, finding (or helping to create) work opportunities for ex-gang members, and so on.

Together with the police, the parliament and other state institutions have also fostered a nonrepressive, preventive, and rehabilitation-oriented approach to confronting youth violence in Nicaragua. In particular, the approval of the *Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia*

(Code of Childhood and Adolescence) in 1998 and the instauration of a *Procuraduría Especial de la Niñez y la Adolescencia* (Special Ombudsman's Office for Children and Adolescents) in 2000 were of paramount importance in this context. Both were not so much a consequence of the ideological conviction of the legislators as an effect of the then ruling party's (PLC) efforts to show compliance with foreign donors' demands for the strengthening of human rights and the rule of law. Nevertheless, the code and the office, together with subsequent legislation and institutional reforms,[42] have reinforced the approach of the police. Above all, they promote the idea that youth violence should not be treated primarily as a security problem, but rather as a problem of social integration, education, health, and human rights. The implementation of this set of legal and institutional changes has been clearly reflected in the judiciary's dealings with juvenile offenders since then: "The number of adolescents deprived of liberty decreased from 449 in 1998 to only 36 in 2003" (Rocha 2005: 7).

Still, the picture of the nonrepressive handling of youth-violence problems in Nicaragua has to be redrawn when the behavior of the police on the local level is taken into account.[43] For Managua, Maclure/Sotelo (2003: 681) note that measures against *pandillas* such as the *Plan de Desarrollo Integral contra la Violencia Juvenil* (Plan for Integral Development against Youth Violence) are , fundamentally, of a repressive nature:

> Although the plan was couched in language that referred to the education and rehabilitation of young delinquents, […] [its] guiding principle […] was that of crime control. Accordingly, police units were mandated to crack down on youth violence by arresting known gang leaders and indicting them for criminal offences. […] [M]ore than 400 adolescents in Managua, many under 15 years old, had been systematically rounded up and incarcerated by the police, without judicial warrants.

Furthermore, Rocha (2005: 10) pinpoints another factor undermining the official, nonrepressive approach of the central authorities:

> Due to the ideological, social, and generational gap between the majority of police officers and those at the highest echelons, most policemen do not act according to their superiors' discourse.

Thus, excessive police violence against youths is widespread. A report of the Ombudsman's Office states that 47 percent of adolescents detained by the police have been mistreated

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[42] In this context, the 2001 *Ley de Promoción del Desarrollo Integral de la Juventud* (Law for the Promotion of the Integral Development of Youth) and the creation of a Ministry of Youth in 2002 were of particular importance. See Rocha/Bellanger 2004: 311-323.

[43] From the perspective of policy analysis, it is important to note that the police force is an actor which, in general terms, intervenes *after* particular policies have been designed (that is, in the implementation phase of the policy cycle; see for example, Jann/Wegrich 89-92), even if the "highest echelons" of the police may take part in the political process at an earlier stage. This paper cannot analyze how and why "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 1980)—the police on the local level—transform official policies in such a way that the policy output significantly differs from the (expressed) intentions of higher level decision makers.

(PDDH 2002: 93). In 2005, a survey among children and adolescents cast a similar light on what is going on in many local police stations:

> Police facilities are perceived as insecure places. As to the actions of some police officers, the consulted persons had observed corruption, physical and sexual violence—harassment, black mail, abuse—and arbitrary action and transgressions in the detention procedures for adolescents or children […].
>
> (CONAPINA/CODENI 2005: 60) [Original quote in Spanish]

Despite these problems of implementation which Nicaragua's "official" policies to reduce youth violence must face—problems all other countries of the isthmus also have to deal with, to a varying degree—the overall trend in the last ten years has been the favoring of a human and children's rights-based approach implying only a minimal amount of repression. This makes Nicaragua different from all other Central American countries; in particular, the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have decided to resort to the rhetoric and practice of the iron fist (see below for the example of El Salvador).

Costa Rica

It is very difficult to describe the Costa Rican state's policies with respect to youth violence or juvenile delinquency because reliable information on this matter is extremely hard to find, even in Costa Rica itself. This seems to indicate, first, that there are no high-profile government policies in this field and, second, that the policies implemented do not generate much concern or criticism in the press, among scholars, or among NGOs (where the project researchers searched for information). Apparently, there has been no major policy change, either towards repressive or towards anti-repressive policies, since the introduction of the *Ley de Justicia Penal Juvenil* (Juvenile Justice Penal Code) in 1996.

This law, just like the *Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia* in Nicaragua, applies the norms of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child to Costa Rican legislation. It is considered a major step and a paradigmatic change from castigatory law to a rehabilitation-oriented approach based on human and children's rights. As one of our sources revealed,[44] this general bias of the code was pushed through mainly by international cooperation agencies such as UNICEF and by technical advisors who drafted the code's wording. The legislators themselves seem to have been less convinced than the approbation of the law may suggest: In a last minute change, they increased the maximum imprisonment for those under 18 years of age from five years, as the technical commission recommended, to 15 years (Article 131). They thus created a certain contradiction between the general anti-repressive bias of the code and this specific stipulation, which made Costa Rica one of the countries with the longest maximum prison sentences for adolescents worldwide. Yet, according to an official state-

[44] Interview with Costa Rican criminologist and judge Douglas Durán on November 29, 2006.

ment of the Costa Rican government (quoted in DNI 2004: 31), the maximum sentence has been imposed only once.

The actual practice of prosecution and jurisdiction is seemingly less draconic than the legislators who approved the law intended. In a way, this is the opposite of what occurs in Nicaragua. In the latter, a fundamentally anti-repressive official policy is only halfheartedly implemented, so that youths, to a certain degree, are exposed to repressive actions; in the former, the difference between official strategy and concrete implementation further softens a somewhat ambiguous approach. As the few sources we found indicate, government policies regarding youth violence and juvenile delinquency lost some of this ambiguity with the coming into office of the Arias administration (May 2006). They now seem to tend more exclusively towards a preventive and rehabilitation-oriented approach. The *Plan nacional de prevención de la violencia y promoción de la paz social* (National Plan for the Prevention of Violence and the Promotion of Social Peace, see Ministerio de Justicia, no date), issued by the Justice Ministry, does not reveal any plans for repressive action against adolescents. On the contrary, the plan highlights the government's aim both to strengthen existing programs and to create new prevention and rehabilitation initiatives in the fields of education, labor market integration, recreation and sports, political participation, etc. According to Costa Rican crime statistics, juvenile delinquency appears to have decreased slightly in recent years (Costa Rica Poder Judicial 2007: 35). It is impossible for the author of this paper, however, to assess whether this decrease is due to government policies or to other factors.

El Salvador

The government of El Salvador has clearly favored repressive measures, the so-called *mano dura* (iron-fist) policies, to reduce delinquency in general and youth gang violence in particular. Police forces have steadily grown in terms of budget and staff. Additionally, the government has increasingly involved the military in combating youth gangs—to the extent that the armed forces have managed to regain much of the domestic power they had gradually lost following the end of the civil war. The police and the military patrol the cities and carry out massive operations, especially in those *barrios* (quarters, neighborhoods) known to be affected by *mara* activities. In these operations, security forces make extensive use of weapons and other military equipment (armored cars, helicopters, etc.) and detain and kill high numbers of suspected youth gang members. Often, youths are arrested on the grounds of being tattooed, a distinctive—though certainly not an exclusive—sign of gang members. Shortly afterwards, many of the detained adolescents and young adults have to be released because of a lack of substantial evidence that they have committed a crime.

In the past, this situation led to harsh conflicts between the government and the judiciary, in particular the judges: Representatives of the executive authorities accused judges of not sentencing young criminals and of sabotaging the government's anti-crime policies. The judges,

in turn, blamed the prosecuting institutions for not providing the necessary evidence. Therefore, beginning in mid-2006, the government has shifted its strategy from massive arrests, which have since become less frequent, to more selective, intelligence-intensive operations. This strategy change was preceded by a gradual but clearly traceable alteration in the way both government officials and the media depicted *maras*: Before late 2005, the gangs were generally characterized as a massive and dangerous, though largely locally based, phenomenon of youth culture. Since then, newspaper coverage and the statements of security authorities have strongly emphasized the gangs' international connections and their relations to the drug trade—thus creating the image of *maras* as structures of "organized crime" and downplaying their subcultural and youth-cultural background.[45]

In El Salvador, the repressive measures against youth gangs enacted by the authorities have been accompanied by changes in the relevant legislation. Generally, these legal changes tend to restrict the civil rights of the citizens or of specified groups of the population, such as minors. In 2003 the Salvadoran parliament passed a law called *Ley Anti Maras* (Anti-*Maras* Law). Ultimately, the Supreme Court annulled the law because it violated the constitution and international treaties the country had signed. Among other things, the law would have given judges the right to judge minors between 12 and 17 years as adults if they were members of a youth gang. In 2004, the legislature enacted another law, called *Ley para el combate de las actividades delincuenciales de grupos o asociaciones ilicitas especiales* (Law for the Combat of Delinquent Activities of Special Illicit Groups or Associations).[46] It did not include the regulations the court had ruled out with regard to the *Ley Anti Maras*, and it was designed as a temporary law, expiring after 90 days. But it still increased punishments for minor and adult gang members and restricted their legal rights.

More recently, in early 2007, the *Ley contra el Crimen Organizado y Delitos de Realización Compleja* (Law against Organized Crime and Offenses of Complex Realization) has come into force. Designed with the intention of accelerating criminal procedures, the law creates special tribunals for homicides, kidnappings, and extortions perpetrated by "*grupo[s] estructurado[s] de dos o más personas*" ("structured group[s] of two or more persons"). It also enables

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[45] For example, in September 2005, *El Diario de Hoy* (28/9/2005) began to describe *maras* as parts of organized crime networks, stating, "Información reciente de la inteligencia policial confirma el dramático cambio que han experimentado las pandillas, al utilizar la infraestructura disponible para cometer delitos propios del crimen organizado." ("Recent police intelligence confirms the dramatic change the gangs have gone through, as they use the available infrastructure to commit crimes typical of organized crime.") In July 2006, *La Prensa Gráfica* (3/7/2006) quoted Interior Minister René Figueroa (talking about an initiative of the executive to reform the country's penal code): "Figueroa […] señaló que con esta reforma se busca [...] tratar a las pandillas como 'crimen organizado, vinculadas al secuestro, narcotráfico y el sicariato.'" ("Figueroa [...] said that this reform is designed to treat gangs as 'organized crime, linked with kidnapping, the drug trade, and contract killing.'")

[46] Even if the word *mara* did not appear in the law's title, a part of its preamble stipulates: "Que dados los niveles actuales de violencia asociada a grupos delincuenciales conocidos como maras o pandillas se vuelve imperativo crear una ley […] que sirva como instrumento punitivo para estos grupos […]." ("That in light of the current level of violence related to delinquent groups known as *maras* or *pandillas*, it has become imperative to create a law […] that serves as a punitive instrument against these groups […].")

the prosecution authorities to carry out "*operaciones encubiertas*" ("covert operations") and to use "*cualquier instrumento o artificio técnico de transmisión o grabación del sonido, la imagen o de cualquier otra señal de comunicación*" ("any technical instrument or skill of transmission, recording of sound, image, or any other communication signal"). This means the law makes trials for some of the most serious delicts faster and expands the possibilities for covert investigations. More importantly, it defines offenses considered typical of the Salvadoran youth gangs—homicides and extortions—as acts of organized crime. Thus, it turns the government's depiction of *maras* as structures of organized crime into a formal legal norm.

According to Salvadoran crime statistics, the repressive policies against youth violence in El Salvador have, so far, not been successful in reducing (youth) violence. They may even be assessed as "counterproductive" (Aguilar Villamariona 2006b).[47] Nonetheless, the government currently seems to be unwilling to change its approach to tackling youth crime. Measures aiming at prevention and rehabilitation, such as the programs *mano amiga* (friendly hand) and *mano extendida* (outstretched hand), can be considered little more than a fig leaf the government uses to counter increasing criticism of its fundamentally repressive policies. Recently, the report of the *Comisión Nacional para la Seguridad Ciudadana y Paz Social* (2007: 51-52, National Commission for Citizen Security and Social Peace) concluded,

> the programs to prevent and treat youth violence that have been implemented in the country so far have been limited in scope, focused on some municipalities, with low levels of coordination between the institutions responsible for their implementation. They have not managed to cover an important part of the population exposed to major risks. [...] Regarding programs of reintegration and social rehabilitation of youth gang members and young offenders they are even more limited than prevention initiatives.
>
> [Original quote in Spanish]

Table 3: Policies to Reduce Youth Violence

Nicaragua	Costa Rica	El Salvador
Nonrepressive on the official level (political actors, higher echelons of police); partially repressive on the implementation level (lower echelons of police)	Nonrepressive	Highly repressive

Source: Author's compilation.

[47] Aguilar Villamariona (2006: 88-90) refers to statistical data provided by the police and forensic medicine, which show that, since 2003, homicides in general as well as homicides and other serious offenses attributed to youth gangs have substantially increased. Álvarez/Fernández Zubieta/Villareal Sotelo (2007: 115) argue that *mano dura* policies have contributed to the proliferation and geographical dispersion of gangs: Fearing detention, gang members migrate internally and internationally and then recruit members in their new environments.

5 Concluding Remarks: Seguridad Ciudadana and the Talk of Youth Crime in Central America

In the three countries analyzed, the public discourse on youth violence can be summarized as a mixture of viewpoints locatable on a continuum between favoring repression on the one hand, and advocating preventive, rehabilitation- and human rights-based policies on the other. Every country has a specific "mix ratio" of these viewpoints, Nicaragua being located rather on the nonrepressive side, Costa Rica somewhere in the middle, and El Salvador on the more repressive side. But neither in Nicaragua nor in El Salvador can the discourses be described as purely nonrepressive or purely repressive. In Nicaragua and Costa Rica, where the social discourse on youth violence—compared to El Salvador—is less prominent in the public debate and less homogeneous between powerful and not so powerful speakers, the state policies are neither very accentuated nor very coherent, whether in terms of repressive or nonrepressive measures. In El Salvador, the state's response to youth violence and juvenile delinquency coincides with a generalized public fear regarding these phenomena.[48] This congruence also applies to particular aspects of youth crime policy. One example of this is the shift in the depiction of youth gangs (in the media and government discourse) from a youth culture problem to one of organized crime, parallel to a corresponding shift in the authorities' strategies to combat the gangs.

In El Salvador youths in general are socially constructed as a potential threat to security. Youth gang members in particular are constructed as the "criminal others" from whom society has to be protected by means of specific *seguridad ciudadana* policies.[49] The same might also apply in the cases of Guatemala and Honduras, which appear to be similar to El Salvador, but (because of the limited geographical scope of the sources analyzed for this paper) this cannot be substantiated here. For Nicaragua and Costa Rica, neither social discourse nor governmental policies suggest that adolescents in general are being stigmatized as a security threat. A closer look at the sources would be necessary, though, to check if there are particular groups of young people, for example young drug addicts, young immigrants, etc., who are systematically constructed as the dangerous "other." In any case, it seems that in Nicaragua and Costa Rica there are other characteristics than simply "being young" that turn a person into a source of fear and an object of security policies. Nevertheless, *maras* are constructed as an imminent (Costa Rica) or only possible (Nicaragua) threat, and the governments of both countries have taken part in an increasing number of regional and international initiatives to fight the gangs.

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[48] Most probably, Cohen's (1980) concept of "moral panic" would apply in the case of the public's fear of youth gangs in El Salvador.

[49] In this regard, the findings of this paper corroborate Hume's (2007: 493) thesis on "the existence of an exclusionary logic that demonised and dehumanised gangs as a collective. The potency of this discourse lay in its appeal to the population and its use to justify heavy-handed (and often unconstitutional) measures."

The analysis of the three countries as individual cases and as a "bounded system" has provided a differentiated insight into the discourse on youth violence in Central America. Given the uncontested prominence of the *mara* issue in the region's (youth) violence debate, the focus of most of the relevant literature lies on El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the countries with a massive *mara* presence and with crime and violence problems perceived as high. This paper has taken Costa Rica and Nicaragua fully into account and has shown that even in one of these "non-*mara* countries," Costa Rica, the discourse on youth violence is an important topic in some discursive spaces, although not as important as in El Salvador. Thus, it is not necessarily the presence of youth gangs that draws public attention to the issue of youth violence. Moreover, as the depiction of *maras* as an imminent or future threat in Costa Rica and Nicaragua shows, the youth gang problem—or, more exactly, the discourse regarding it—in one part of the "bounded system" has produced significant effects on the way youth violence is discursively treated in other parts of the system.

On the basis of the sources analyzed in this paper, it is not possible to draw conclusions concerning *causal* relations between discourse and policies. However, the analysis suggests that there is a strong relation and mutual influence between the public's fear (or disregard) of youth violence and the state's policies to reduce that kind of violence. Based on the explorative findings of the qualitative research presented in this paper, it is possible and necessary to conduct more and differently designed research to determine what the causal linkages between discourse and policy in the field of youth violence in Central America are. Also, further research efforts should be undertaken to discover why, how, and by whom the discourses are originally generated and what the power relations which cause them to become hegemonic—and relevant in the policymaking process—are. This kind of "archaeology" (in the Foucaultian sense of the word) would help in understanding the deeper roots of anti-youth-crime policies which in some countries such as El Salvador, tend to disregard human and children's rights.

Overall, it seems fruitful, not only for Central America but also for other Latin American countries, to emphasize the social discourse on violence and crime while researching public policies that address these problems. The concept of *seguridad ciudadana* is not specific to Central America; it is present and relevant all through Latin America. In each context, there may be other groups of citizens marked by society as the "criminal others" from whom society has to be protected, be they immigrants, ethnic minorities, a specific age group, drug consumers, football fans, or whoever. In this paper, it has been shown that one of these demonized groups can be a whole generation, as in El Salvador. Political and social actors across Latin America should be aware that such "intergenerational apartheid" (Lock 2006) has damaging effects for democracy, human rights, and development in the region. They should design policies not only to prevent juvenile delinquency and youth violence—as states and civic organizations increasingly do—but also to prevent societies from defining their own adolescents as a threat to the citizens' security.

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